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DRAFT VERSION

Abstract

A recent special issue of the Journal for Common Market Studies focused on the European Union's political myths (No. 1, Vol. 48, 2010). Acknowledging an inherently political, yet simultaneously cultural, object of study, this has opened up a new focus within the study of the European Union, which allows for the exploration of politically relevant culturalist ideas. Fundamental questions of political theoretical engagement as well as innovative methodological approaches can be brought into the mainstream of a field that has long been shaped by rationalist, positivist ontology, and empiricist, often comparative, epistemology. The present paper welcomes these new opportunities. It proposes a discursive constructionist approach to the study of the EU that is neither constrained by intergovernmentalist theoretical commitments nor advanced by supranationalist normative ideas. From the perspective of a 'back to the basics' starting point that establishes links to fundamental concepts of political sciences, such as legitimacy, identity and ideology, it complements some of the features of EU political myth already identified in the 2010 special issue of the JCMS. In doing so, it touches on the political role of discourse in the creation of identity and legitimacy and, consequently, the uses of methods of discourse analysis in the study of political entities including the EU.

Introduction

In the recent past, issues of identity – previously widely discussed not only in academic studies, but also by the leaders and communicators of the European Union (EU) – have been somewhat side-lined. Public discourses have focused on issues that in conventional terms might be considered more substantial problems of the European Union's policies and positioning not so much, as it is usually referred to, on 'the world stage', but more in the global market. The debt crises faced by a number of European Union member states, foremost Greece, but also Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland, have been an even more formidable challenge for the Union. This is not so much the case because they necessarily threaten the EU's – albeit in some quarters contested – pet project of the single currency, the Euro. It is more for the fact that (even only the possibility of) the failure of this pet project has the potential to put into question all other aspects of the Union. This, at least is what recent news headlines heralding the imminent collapse of the EU have us believe. However, such headlines do not seem to be based in any concrete statements, considerations or discussions about a wish or the inevitability of discontinuing the Union, but rather on the EU's leaders' perplexity and apparent listlessness vis-à-vis the media's hunger for coherent explanations as well as vision in the face of these crises. This suggests that they can be made sense of not only in terms of the financial-political problems and imperatives they poses. Importantly, they also expose the lack of coherent discourses or, as Jo (2007) calls them, 'myths' to form the foundation of successful EU governance.

Jo's argument is that rather than a linear and continuous upwards trajectory of successful, increasingly deepening and widening governance, the history of European integration consists of 'a succession of life-threatening political crises that have been constructively resolved' (2007: 1). After criticising the former portrayal, which is usually privileged by European Union institutions and officials, he explains that it is this and the tendency to perceive and present every new crisis as the worst ever that make every new crisis appear as the first yet. He then goes on to explain that the regulatory mechanism that leads to the successful resolution of the EU's crises is political myth; strategically mobilised and widely accepted political narratives or stories such as those of inherent European unity or the Franco-German entente. He thus refers to particular visions or coherence-endowing narratives that are mobilised in order to generate support and legitimacy as well as form the foundation of substantive solutions to EU crises. It will be interesting to see what such narratives will emerge in the present critical context. However, one important oversight of Jo's account will be addressed in this paper: if crisis is characterised by the lack of mobilising and justifying discourses

and narratives, then the question arises whether periods of political stability and unchallenged governance are not characterised by the presence of such myths.

In order to approach an understanding of the function and existence of successful political myths in the EU the present paper first presents a theoretical framework of the concept itself. Then it reviews previous engagement with the issue in the context of studies of the European Union, highlighting both valuable insights and shortcomings. It particularly mentions issues of identity and legitimacy, namely so-called European identity and the legitimacy of the EU as a governing entity, as matters of great relevance to the concept. The paper then moves on to briefly touch on methodological questions that, before a background of some paradigmatic limitations of conventional European integration theories, highlight the importance of discourse analytical approaches to the study of politics in general and of the European Union as a political and cultural as well as economic union in particular. It concludes by arguing that an analysis of the Union's institutions', especially the Commission's, efforts at political communication and marketing offer insights into how they seek to sustain their legitimacy, popular support, and with that the success of their governance by constructing a specific type of European identity.

Previous engagement with political myth

The defining features of political myths, according to Flood (2002), are, firstly, that they are narratives that carry ideological beliefs; secondly, that they present themselves as and are held to be true and, often, sacrosanct and insulated from critique; thirdly, they may appear in regional or diachronic variations and synchronic analogies. All these characteristics are accepted here, including the premise of the first one on a structural understanding rather than Marxist condemnation of ideology. The one adopted here is that described by Freeden (1996) of ideologies as 'patterns of thought-behaviour' or clusters of concepts that give meaning to the world in empirical and normative terms and, thus, enable individual and, more importantly, collective identification and action. However, a forth defining characteristic proposed by Flood (2002), namely that myths display, in their narrative, a sequence of connected past, present and, possibly, future events, is considered as unnecessarily limiting in its insistence in a temporal or historical reference point. It is, therefore, replaced by the understanding that a constant reference point is needed around which a narrative is constructed (Lenschow and Sprungk 2010). Apart from, say, antagonistic relations with an 'other' or 'out-group', or normative ideals, this can – and often, though not always, does – take

the shape of a historical event. In this guise, myths are similar to so-called historical memories of the past, which is the reason that the latter have received so much attention in the context of studies of national or quasi-national identities (Hobsbawm 1983, Anderson 1983, Eder 2007). A further similarity lies in the fact that the original source of the story is often unidentifiable and not considered of particular importance to assessments of its relevance and importance. But in common parlance myth is often understood as referring to a story untrue even if it is more or less widely believed. Such an understanding of necessary inaccuracy as a defining feature, however, is considered mistaken here, for it has no bearing on the identity-endowing function of a mythopoeic narrative discourse.

In their combination, these criteria carry a variety of important points. It has already been stated that they enable collective action, but it is worthwhile to look at this in detail. Relating ideological content by means of narratives, myths provide inspiration and justification that can form the basis of any kind of human action; they can express a will to act or condone inaction and quietism. As such, MacNeill (1986: 23) explains,

> [m]yth lies at the basis of human society. That is because myths are general statements about the world and its parts, and in particular about nations and other human in-groups, that are believed to be true and then acted on whenever circumstances suggest or require common response. This is mankind's substitute for instinct. It is the unique and characteristic human way of acting together. A people without a full quiver of relevant agreed-upon statements, accepted in advance through education or less formalized acculturation, soon finds itself in deep trouble, for, in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain.

While not specifically concerned with political myth, this assessment already suggests the political function of mythical narratives in general. More politically oriented analyses have identified myth as the 'ideologically marked' (Flood 2002) or 'value-impregnated beliefs and notions that men [sic]… live by and live for' (MacIver 1947: 4). They 'turn valuations into propositions about the nature of things' (ibid: 39) and without the direction they provide no political action could be taken. As the above analogy to instinct suggests, in their narrative form, myths work beyond and, thus, defy rational argument as the dominant form of political expression (Sorel 1999, Bottici 2007). However, the study of political myth does not imply an analytically unhelpful endorsement of (alleged) irrationality. Rather, it intends to draw attention to role of the affective dimension in communication, identification and politics in general. Particularly in combination with Mouffe's (1998) argument that de-ideologising and de-politicising politics, which often involves the dismissal of its affective dimension, leads to – literally – disaffection and apathy, this is an important

observation to keep in mind, especially in the European Union, which is continuously confronted with the question of its own legitimacy.

Previous engagement with European Union political myths

Most recent in the rather sporadic engagement with political myth in the European Union is a 2010 special issue of the Journal for Common Market Studies (No. 1, Vol. 48). Confirming the existence and illustrating some of the diversity of the EU's myths, the narratives discussed in it address myths of contemporary constitutionalism (Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener 2010), fundamental rights (Smismans 2010), the economy and its role in European integration (Jones 2010), gender equality (MacRae 2010), the EU's role in world politics (Manners 2010), politics of and policies on the environment (Lenschow and Sprungk 2010), and the EU's competition policy (Akman and Kassim 2010). While some of the articles build on a number of previously established important aspects of political myths in the European Union and contribute new insights, more thorough conceptual and empirical engagement with the function and specific content of EU myths is needed, especially as regards their relevance to the study of so-called European identity and to the legitimacy of the EU.

For, in several of the articles, the discussion overlooks and inadvertently obscures the relevance of political myths to these issues by simply recounting those narratives disseminated by the EU institutions. By this process, academics, whose task is analysis, allow themselves to be instrumentalised for the political end of perpetuating an ideologically marked and identity-endowing narrative of what it means to be 'European'. While the introductory article (Della Sala 2010) as well as some of the other contributions (Manners 2010, Jones 2010, Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener 2010, Akman and Kassim 2010) touch on or even explicitly acknowledge the role of academic literature in the dissemination and establishment of EU myths, in most cases such acknowledgement takes a rather abstract form and does not lead to explicit strategies of disentangling oneself from the myth-making process. Such strategies could take the form of accurate nomenclature when referring to the EU, rather than conflation with the broader notion of Europe. Another strategy might be a critical approach that aims to identify the mythopoeic nature of stories proposed by the EU and to explore their function as political myths rather than simply labelling them as myth and then recounting their contents.

One myth that is particularly often recounted in terms similar to or the same as those employed by the EU, is that of its historical development; its arising out of the ashes of World War II and its evolution from a purely economic union into a political entity. This applies not only to the articles in question here and other accounts of the political myths of the EU; throughout the field of EU studies it has become customary, often in the form of introductions to substantively different topics, to reproduce this story in one variant or another. As some authors in the special edition of JCMS identify, the story of historical development can be identified as a foundational myth because it deals with the foundation period and basic principles of the union. As identified by several of the authors in the JCMS special issue, myth often takes the form of references to the past in order to make sense of the present or give direction for the future. In this way, i.e. by providing concrete universals or narratively manifested assessments and standards of assumed universal applicability, myth offers explanations and justifications for political events and decisions. However, as argued before, contrary to conventional assumption, myth does not rely exclusively on historical narrative. Therefore, a sole focus on the role of collective memory, as reproduced in this context by Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener (2010), is misleading. More insightful is Lenschow and Sprungk's (2010) more general understanding of the need of a constant reference point. This can be a historical event, and in so far collective memory still has a large role to play. However, collective remembering of historical events is not the only way in which constant reference points can be drawn on in myth-making and myth-dissemination. While mostly done implicitly, several of the authors contributing to JCMS touch on other constant reference points currently mobilised in EU myths, such as public hopes, expectations and aspirations (i.e. normative political ideas), attributes and values (e.g. rationality) and a sense of exceptionalism connected to them. Also identifiable as a constant reference point, the construction of antagonism vis-à-vis a non-EUropean 'other', however, is overlooked completely in the JCMS contributions. It is maintained here, however, that this is not due to such a reference point not figuring in EU myths, but more to do with the potential of such an observation to conflict with the sacrosanct myth of inclusiveness of the EU.

Thus, it can be observed that the identification and analysis of political myths may be guided by the internal make-up of the myth-complex as well as political considerations; selective observation such as the one outlined above fulfils a political function and it can be argued that the promotion of political myth follows a similar pattern. Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener's (2010) distinction between cultural and political memory will help clarify this: the former fulfils an archival function, aiming to store information in its entirety, while the latter fulfils a strategic function of promoting only what is political useful and desirable. As discussed above, historical memory is only one among several

reference points of political myth. It is therefore argued here that the mobilisation of all types of myths is strategic in the same way as memory; it does not aim at archiving the entire information, but at privileging such that is politically useful and desirable. However, this strategic promotion of some myths at the expense of others and the hierarchies of significance it entails are based in the behaviour of myth-makers and -disseminators, and not an inherent feature of political myths themselves. Therefore, it is questionable whether the hierarchical distinction by Della Sala and others in JCMS between primary (e.g. the EU's historical development) and derivative ones (such as 'green' or 'gender equal Europe') is helpful. A singular myth, even if older and better established than others, can never fulfil the function of political myth within a polity. For their function to be fulfilled, a plurality of myths or myth-complex is needed. Like the morphology of ideology as clusters of concepts rather than coherent systems of beliefs (Freeden 1996), it is their interplay that allows them to offer an account of the world and direction for the future in various areas of life and politics. While myths may overlap on certain issues of content, this does not necessarily mean that they are derived from each other, and it makes more sense to perceive of them in terms of their simultaneity than an understanding of hierarchy that is imposed for analytical convenience or out of academic convention.

In other aspects, too, some of the engagement offered in JCMS (e.g. Jones 2010, Smismans 2010) seems to follow the conventions of previous EU studies work, e.g. its strong concern with the EU's supra- and therefore quasi-national nature. Thus, it focuses on issues such as myth competition and free-riding between the EU and its member states. With regard to the former, a useful distinction is made between myth competition that implies the direct competition of alternative ideological contents of stories originating from different levels of the polity and tensions that sometimes arise between myths supported – at least in theory and verbal commitment – by both and the level of practical implementation in the member states. Free-riding is understood as an actor benefiting from congruence between myths disseminated by the national and supranational level. Congruence is not simply understood as sameness or consistency in a strict sense, but more vaguely as compatibility. Analysing political myths in terms of this kind of classification seems to be implicitly based in a zero-sum rather than constructive mutually reinforcing understanding of the interplay of political myths. Nevertheless, it could be an interesting avenue for future research in its own right, especially if taking note of the utility of myths', like ideologies', ability to accommodate contradictions. Furthermore, the approach makes explicit and, therefore, opens up to analysis the question of myths' success. The latter is generally understood as acceptance of the myths by the people within the polity concerned, which in turn can be interpreted as an expression of consensus

on its form of political rule (Della Sala 2010). Therefore – and this will be discussed later – it is an important part of the function of political myth to legitimise governing structures. But, like any form of hegemonic ideological discourse, though temporarily dominant, political myths are open to contestation and change. Jones (2010) rightly explains that myths resemble scientific paradigms, which Kuhn (1970) pointed out have the following life cycle: conjecture is proven correct by failure to falsify, i.e. can be believed until – and only until – they are refuted. Myths can be believed until the narrative they offer is no longer compatible with the observed circumstances of the individuals that are meant to believe it.

However, this does not mean that falsification, e.g. in the form of the discovery of inaccuracy of the mythical narrative, must lead to rejection of the myth. The reproduction by several of the authors of the juxtaposition of true or factually correct accounts with the inaccurate, distorted or downright false accounts seen to be offered by myths must therefore be lamented. As has been discussed in the previous section, accuracy or truthfulness or the lack thereof are not defining aspects of political myth. Myths are foremost interesting and important to political study because of what they do, rather than what they say. This is not to suggest disregarding their contents completely, as some authors in JMCS (e.g. Jones 2010, Della Sala 2010) seem to suggest, but intended to point out that contents are not relevant as a measure of accuracy. Contents do matter as a means to a political end, which is another possible avenue for future empirical research.[1] More immediately, political myths matter for what they do in that they offer explanations and justifications of the status quo, political decisions or future direction by providing believable narratives. As Della Sala explains, in contrast to 'logos', which is based on the observable, 'muthos' is based on the believable, and it is their 'capacity to make us believe the normative vision they are presenting' (2010: 7) that makes political myths fascinating. Equally fascinating is the result of this ability to create belief, namely the synchronisation and direction of emotion (cf. Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener 2010). The question that poses itself (and is articulated by Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener 2010: 32) is how, by means of political myths, practices are verified and validated. However, while the above points and references clearly suggest that some authors in JCMS touch on these very important points, neither the insight that normative or ideological considerations are at play and therefore of great relevance to the study of myth, nor the realisation that emotion or affect play a significant role in the phenomenon and are therefore equally relevant are explored in any way.

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[1] One which the author of the present paper is currently engaging in.

Even in the important contributions to the understanding of political myth that the authors represented in JCMS make by outlining several of the practicalities of political myths' functions within the context of the EU, they unfortunately take for granted and, thus, overlook the significance of some of the most fundamental aspects it relates to, such as identity and legitmacy. For instance, in a helpful extension of Flood's notion of political myth being sacrosanct, Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener (2010) identify the following three strategies in the establishment of political myths: dissemination, ritualisation, sacralisation. These are not clearly separable, chronologically consecutive stages, but simultaneously at work in processes of political myth-making. While dissemination ostensibly describes the mere spreading of specific narratives, it is important to keep in mind the political-selective rather than cultural-archival function of modes of memory. Moving on to ritualisation, the authors explain that this entails not only repetition but also the compression of contents for normative clarity. The latter process is often conceptualised in critical terms as a form of distortion by authors who subscribe to the principle of accuracy as a defining aspect of political myths. However, an understanding of the process of ritualisation as simplification, compression or condensation is more helpful in understanding the phenomenon than simplistic condemnation of inaccuracy or falsehood; it simultaneously renders accessible some, while obscuring other, main ideological tenets and provides standardisation that lends itself to instrumentalisation in communication to large numbers of people. Finally, the process of sacralisation counteracts any criticism of falsehood by equating questioning of the myth with questioning of the entire entity it is about and helps construct. By this, myth becomes a means for the decontestation of both the ideological content it ascribes to a political entity and the nature and validity of that entity per se and, thus, can be understood as giving rise to 'a sort of Gramscian 'common sense'' (Della Sala 2010: 9, emphasis in the original).

In view of the political function of privileging some views of the world over others and the acceptance of myths' contribution to the definition of a specific understanding of 'common sense', the point touched on above that success of a political myth suggests political consensus becomes problematic in view of their arbitrariness and foundation on structural power and in the sense that it is unclear which of the two – structural power and common sense – is the cause and which the effect. This is where the issue of what could be called the identity-legitimacy complex comes into the equation. It is one of the most fundamental issues concerning political myth – however, one which is often taken for granted and, though touched on by several authors contributing to the special issue of JCMS, its significance is largely overlooked. When answering the question 'Does the EU need myths, and what for?' with references to its legitimacy, the authors contributing to the JCMS special

issue (e.g. Della Sala 2010 and Smismans 2010) do not seem to consider it a useful exercise to outline or discuss what this means. Put in plain words, 'legitimacy' in this context refers to the legitimate exercise of authority. This is conventionally understood in terms of input legitimacy based on the democratic principles and processes of participation of the EU or output legitimacy, which claims that efficiency and effectiveness of governance endow the EU with a right to take political decisions and exercise authority (e.g. Enderlein 2006). It becomes clear, however, from the discussion of political myths above that both such forms of legitimacy are not given in and of themselves, but rely fundamentally on the mobilisation of discourses, often in the shape of ostensibly descriptive yet normative narratives, of political expediency or morality. And while citizens as recipients of these myths also engage in their formulation and perpetuation, one particularly well-placed myth-maker are the institutions of the European Union itself as they have privileged resources to produce and authoritatively disseminate them (cf. Bourdieu's (1991) notion of 'social capital'.). One form of political communication they engage in are 'communicative discourses' (Schmidt 2006) in the form of public relations brochures. It is these that are studied in the larger project of which the present paper forms a part.

Similarly to the concept of legitimacy, only few of the articles in the JCMS special issue relate political myths to questions of identity and belonging (cf. Della Sala 2010, Smismans 2010, Jones 2010, Lenschow and Sprungk 2010). Yet, even if identity is touched on, it is only mentioned in a cursory fashion and neither explained in detail as a concept nor explored in its relation to political myths. While Hansen-Magnusson and Wiener (2010) state that myths are of a collective nature, this assessment is incomplete in view of the fact that identity can be made sense of, amongst other definitions, as being generally about the discourses and stories individuals tell, aspire to tell or to have told about themselves. It is also incomplete vis-à-vis the above definition of political myths as ideologically marked, collectively believed narratives that endow collectives with a sense of identity. This is where some of the assumptions underlying the articles in the special issue of JCMS need to be made explicit in order to make sense of identity of this kind: for one thing, identification is very often equated – via feelings of solidarity with others who may be part of the greater good achieved by the polity – with support. For another, information is often equated with identification. Both these assumptions are simplistic. While information can lead to identification (as e.g. Bruter 2005 finds), it is not self-evident that there is a necessary causal relation between them. And while identification very often leads to support, a relationship of simple, straightforward causality between the two

cannot be taken for granted either.[2] It is suggested here that both these equations, and the empirical observations they are based on, can, however, be explained through the nature of political myth. Viewed in a rationalist light, a clear distinction can be made in political communication between myths and formats of political communication that are ostensibly only concerned with information (such as the public relations brochures mentioned above). However, it is argued here that myth is ubiquitous in political communication and 'mere information' impossible as even factual accounts involve techniques of framing partly determined by personal ideological commitments, partly by the structure of the political communication practices (Herman and Chomsky 2002) as well as various degrees of propaganda (Jowett and O'Donnell 1992). In contrast to other forms of political communication that explicitly aim at persuasion in the form of a eureka experience in which the citizen adapts his or her position as a result of convincing factual reasoning, myths operate by means of affective narratives. These obscure the process of persuasion through the naturalisation of a normative position. They do so by means of their narrative structure which follows a logic of inevitability different from rational argument, for instance chronology or binary opposition, and by contextualisation of a narrative position with ideologically marked descriptions of the political world, of a political issue and ways to approach it.

New approach, new insights, new methods

As such, engagement with political myths in the European Union, presented in aspects by the recent special issue of the Journal of Common Market Studies, but also by Hansen and Williams (1999) and Stråth (2005), acknowledges an inherently political object of study due to the insight of their ideological as well as collective identity-endowing nature and their political function of selective promotion of some representations of the political world and issues over others. Simultaneously the political myths of the European Union form a cultural object of study as questions of such representations both in institutional communications and popular discourse give insight into what it means to be European along the lines of Delanty and Rumford's (2005: 50) understanding of European identification:

> Rather than relate the identity of Europe to a set of cultural values, goals, territory or people – what in general may constitute the cultural *content* of the idea of Europe – it is more fruitful to see it in terms of a socio-cognitive *form* consisting of repertoires of evaluation, discursive practices and identity projects… (emphasis in the original)

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[2] One example for this may be the diminishing levels of support in EU member states that still feature strong so-called European identification, such as Germany.

Together with such a new political-cultural focus within the study of the European Union, it is important to note that the approach adopted here to the study of political myth also overcomes a number of conventional assumptions, theoretical and methodological commitments, that it is argued hinder some insights – at the same time as they allow others – into what is conventionally termed 'European integration'.

Conventional discussions of European integration are dominated by the long-standing debate between neofunctionalism (Haas 1958) and intergovernmentalism (Hoffmann 1966, Moravscik 1993).[3] However, the present paper aims to go beyond this debate. It is neither constrained by intergovernmentalist theoretical commitments to the continued relevance of the nation state, nor does it advance supranationalist normative ideas about the future of the European Union. It argues that despite their differences, both these – and other – mainstream European integration theories, share assumptions that define them as belonging to one and the same scientific paradigm. In his seminal book, 'The structure of scientific revolutions', Kuhn (1970) explains that such a paradigm consists of the basic assumptions that researchers in a particular field hold in common. These assumptions permeate their theoretical commitments; determine their epistemology and what methodology is deemed to be appropriate in the field. By the means of these underlying rules, paradigms constitute the scientific community that adheres to them. And while enabling study, through the postulation and testing of cause-effect relationships, in some areas, it needs to be clear that even though taken as the sign of a successful paradigm, lack of self-reflexiveness and belief in the correctness of the own or impossibility of any alternative approach are wholly mistaken. For the underlying rules of any paradigm are necessarily exclusive of, and therefore hinder study in, other areas.

A number of such paradigmatic assumptions can be identified in mainstream European integration theories. For instance, a continued methodological nationalism, i.e. the assumption that the nation state is the prevalent container of meaning and therefore also conceptual instrument of analysis, can be discerned – be it in the form of claims of the continued relevance of the nation states that make up the EU, or in the expectation of a future supranational entity that is substantially (no least betrayed by its etymology) modelled on the nation state. Furthermore, both of these foci of approach are couched in post-Enlightenment terms of (quasi-)individualism and rationalism; while individuals are rarely the focus of study, states as well as other political institutions are nominalised and treated as if they were endowed with the faculty of reason to follow rational choices with an

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[3] For a summary of the arguments of these two schools of thought, see any reputable text book on the European Union, such as Wiener and Diez's (2009) *European Integration Theory*.

objective to maximise their interests. And while such underlying ideas enable a variety of questions to be studied about the process and likely outcome of European integration, they also lead to the oversight of some relevant points. They fail, for instance, to account for processes of the so-called European identification of individuals. Even neofunctionalism's concept of spillover, predicted to take place not only from the economic to the political, but also from the political to the cultural realm, only claims its occurrence but does not explain the process. And transactionalism (Deutsch 1953), which held the promise to analyse the latter in detail, took a turn away from studying the nature of the transactions it identified as the basis of shared identity towards the quantitative measurement of their density. Later accounts inspired by this school of thought, such as Eder's (2007), aimed to remedy this development, but despite contributing important insights reproduced some of the paradigmatic assumptions (namely the understanding of the importance of quasi-individualism and rationalism).

The present approach, however, overcomes the above-mentioned assumptions. It allows for particularistic study to identify said 'repertoires of evaluation, discursive practices and identity projects' (Delanty and Rumford 2005: 50). With its focus on the simultaneously individual and collective identity-endowing function of ideologically marked narratives, it enables the analysis of a fundamental communication-driven political yet also culturally contingent practice on the levels of the individual, groups, and institutions. Acknowledging the affective dimension of both ideological content and narrative structure of political myths, it overcomes the assumption of rationalism as the prevalent or even sole mode of political practice. Furthermore, it overcomes the dilemma of a simplistic either/or understanding of structure and agency by addressing both. Last but not least, its focus on communication allows for a discursive constructionist approach to be brought into the mainstream of so-called European studies. Not only does such a constructionist approach, combined with methods of discourse analysis, illuminate how meanings of concepts such as 'Europeanness' or 'European identity' arise. The understanding of these concepts also allows the analyst to study the discursive and semantic basis of the EU's legitimacy as well as the power that structures both the discursive practices and the 'meanings-in-use' (Weldes 1998) out of which it arises. In short, a social, and discursive, constructionist approach allows for critical engagement that far from being an expression of Euro-scepticism or even anti-Europeanism, is constructive in its identification of room for improvement and potential solutions to problems that the Union is currently facing.[4] In this

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[4] Some may argue that this is not the point of academic work, but such critics would do well to bear in mind that a lot of academic engagement with the European Union is actively engaged in or lends itself to legitimising it. Moreover, an endeavour to identify room for improvement of structures of governance of the EU such as

respect, allowing an alternative paradigm to complement the current mainstream one can only be of advantage to the field of European Union studies.

Concluding remarks

Overall, the present paper argues that it is of great importance to any understanding of so-called European identity and the legitimacy of the EU to study not only what 'Euroepeanness' refers to, but also how its meaning arises. Regarding the former, i.e. the substance of its meaning, it is helpful to make sense of the term 'Europe' as an 'empty signifier' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001); a term that provides a nodal point to tie together the meanings of its constituent ideological concepts. Regarding the latter, namely the process of the construction or the emergence of meanings, it is worth noting that the necessary 'how-possible questions' (Doty 1993) that aim to elucidate just that (usually by methods of critical discourse analysis) are logically prior to questions of substantive policy or processes of the EU. It can, thus, be argued that it is necessary to study the – according to Checkel (1999: 546) – in the context of studies of the European Union neglected field of 'social learning and normative diffusion' and it is proposed here that political myth is a useful conceptual tool for this endeavour.

The present paper welcomes the new opportunities opened up by this simultaneously political and cultural focus of study. Before the background of a conceptual framework it highlights the strengths and limitations of previous engagement with political myth in the context of the European Union. It proposes a discursive constructionist approach to the study of the EU that is neither constrained by intergovernmentalist theoretical commitments nor advanced to further supranationalist normative ideas. From the perspective of a 'back to the basics' starting point that establishes links to fundamental concepts of political sciences, such as legitimacy, identity and ideology, it complements some of the features of EU political myth already identified in the 2010 special issue of the JCMS. It argues that fundamental questions of political engagement as well as innovative methodological approaches can be brought into the mainstream of a field that has long been shaped by rationalist, positivist ontology, and empiricist, often comparative, epistemology. In doing so, it touches on the political role of discourse in the creation of identity and legitimacy and, consequently, the uses of methods of discourse analysis in the study of political entities including the EU. With the institutions

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the one proposed here cannot be considered a problematic proposition as it is based on a critical analysis of its idiosyncrasies, biases, inequalities, and other shortcomings.

of the European Union in a privileged position to construct and disseminate such discourses, they seem an obvious choice as an object of this kind of study.

Thus, by way of a conclusion, the present paper suggests that an analysis of the Union's institutions', especially the Commission's, efforts at political communication and marketing can offer insights into how the institutions seek to sustain their legitimacy, popular support, and with that the success of their governance by constructing a specific type of European identity. And while the content of this particular identity project is of interest, so are its discursive form, and its implicit structures of power and evaluation, which combine into a cultural expression of a specific shape. Myths are certainly one such type of expression, and they warrant a more political-anthropologically oriented approach of study that would certainly enrich so-called European Studies.

And, to return to some of the introductory thoughts: no matter the outcome of the current so-called Euro crisis, it will be interesting to study the mythopoeic narratives the leaders of the European Union will draw on to bolster their continued claims to legitimacy, for they will form an expression of their politico-cultural understanding of what it means to be EUropean, even if it remains to be seen whether their efforts will be rewarded by popular acceptance of these myths and their underlying ideological content.

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